

CURRENT INTERESTS

Celebrating a Century of Women in the Law: Using Historical Exhibitions to Enhance User Engagement and Promote a Library Service

Abstract: In 2019 the Bar of Ireland Law Library launched an online exhibition detailing the first one hundred years of women in the law in Ireland and the first one hundred women called to the Irish Bar. The online exhibition coincided with the centenary celebrations of the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919 and a physical exhibition curated in collaboration with the Honorable Society of Kings Inns and the Law Society of Ireland. This article by Vanessa Curley and Sarah Foley explores the background to how Law Library staff became involved in creating historical exhibitions, the development of a digital archive of The Bar of Ireland and curating online exhibitions to complement this. It will also discuss the benefits of such activities to the Law Library service and the wider Bar of Ireland.

Keywords: law libraries; user engagement; exhibitions; women and the law; Ireland

INTRODUCTION

For over 200 years the Bar of Ireland Law Library has been the centre of life at the independent Irish Bar. From its origins as the Law Library Society in a small octagonal room in the Four Courts of 1816, to the present-day library housed in four locations across Dublin and Cork, it has been the consistent beating heart in the daily practice of Irish Barristers. Its remarkable survival through world wars, political upheaval and the birth of a new state demonstrates the resilience and determination of its members to not only preserve this distinctive way of life but to always adapt and grow amidst the backdrop of changes in Irish society.

A few years ago, the library service within the Bar of Ireland put forward a proposal to preserve this unique history by creating an archive that would be accessible to members and colleagues alike within the organisation. Minute books dating back to 1816 were dusted off, restored and digitised in order to present them in a fully searchable digital format to our membership. The idea was to create an online archive of the minute books that would be complemented by online exhibitions telling stories of the Law Library and how its members both dealt with the challenges of their times and affected change within society in Ireland.

Work commenced against the backdrop of the landmark legislation, the Legal Services Regulation Act 2015,

which is changing the nature of the legal profession in Ireland and how it is structured and regulated. Given our knowledge of the history of the Law Library and The Bar of Ireland we saw its potential as a tool too instil pride in the organisation for practising barristers and to connect them with the unique heritage of the profession as a whole. The digital archive project linked nicely to the wider organisation's goals, specifically, improving public knowledge of the history and traditions of the profession, to highlight the importance of female participation, to raise our profile in the minds of existing and new stakeholders and it also supported our goals to further promote library services to members of the Law Library.

HISTORICAL EXHIBITIONS

In order to place the minute books in context we proposed producing a series of exhibitions on particular aspects of the history of the Law Library. Happily, our work coincided with a number of historically significant centenaries. In 2016 the library staff worked with the Courts Centenary Commemoration Committee to mark the role of the Four Courts during the 1916 Easter Rising. We proposed putting together an exhibition detailing the events that occurred within and around the Four Courts complex and telling the stories of barristers' family



Figure 1: David Barniville SC, then Chairman of The Bar of Ireland and then Chief Justice Susan Denham at the launch of the 1916 Exhibition.

members who had been involved. The physical exhibition and accompanying booklet, *Bullets Books and Barricades – the story and legacy of the Four Courts 1916* were a great success and showed the potential of using the history of the Law Library to connect it with important moments in the history of the State as well as the local community.

FIRST WORLD WAR COMMEMORATIONS

Our next project was to curate an exhibition to commemorate the barristers who lost their lives during the First World War, not just in the format of physical boards but using the opportunities provided by technology to create an online exhibition that would reach a wider audience outside of the members of the Bar of Ireland.

With a very limited budget to work with we knew that we needed a cost-effective solution to present our exhibition online. Recently the Bar of Ireland had moved to Office 365 and it was within the package of new applications available to us that we discovered Sway, a storytelling application within which you can create interactive reports, presentations, and personal stories. An exhibition created on Sway could then be made available through our website, not only to our members but to other stakeholders, interested parties and members of the public outside of the organisation. Though Microsoft provides online tutorials on how to use the application we felt we required more guidance on how to fully utilise it in relation to our needs. We attended a short half day course with IT training specialists who showed us how to realise the potential of Sway as an online presentation tool for our exhibitions.

To accompany the launch of this exhibition we also put the Irish War Memorial records on display. In 2017, during some routine cataloguing work by library staff in

the Four Courts, eight large volumes with tattered and faded binding were discovered. Covered in dust and lying on their side they seemed unremarkable, however, upon opening them a rich tapestry of illustrations accompanying long lists of names was revealed. Further investigation revealed that we had in our collection the full eight volume set of Ireland's War Memorial Records. Published in 1923 by the Committee of the Irish National War Memorial, the set records the names of 49,435 Irish men and women from all over the island of Ireland, who were killed in action or died of wounds between 1914 and 1918. One hundred copies of the eight-volume set were printed for distribution throughout the principal libraries of the country and as an institution that had been enormously impacted by the war the Law Library was one of these recipients. Of the one hundred sets printed only thirty-five were known to have survived up until the discovery of our set. Once the significance of the find was realised, we sent the full set to be repaired. Despite years of neglect the volumes were in excellent condition so we had them rebound in full leather to make them available for viewing in the weeks leading up to and after Armistice Day 2018. They helped to personalise the exhibition for many of our members as they could look at the names and details of family members who were listed.

We then went on to curate an online exhibition to accompany the physical boards and memorial records which proved highly successful in taking our story to a wider audience. Up to January 2021 the exhibition has been viewed by nearly 3,000 people. The exhibition as a whole was launched on Armistice Day, 11th November 2018, with the Chief Justice of Ireland and the Lord Chief Justice of Northern Ireland in attendance, allowing both Bars, north and south of the border, to commemorate their fallen colleagues.



Figure 2: Panels from the First World War exhibition on permanent display beside the war memorial in the Four Courts, Dublin.

100 YEARS OF WOMEN IN THE LAW

December 2019 represented the centenary anniversary of the passing of the first piece of equal opportunities legislation, the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919. Though it did not lead to the full emancipation of women within society, there were still restrictions on women entering the civil service, who was entitled to vote and the types of cases they could serve on as jurors, it was an important step towards providing a public space for

women to engage in professions they were previously excluded from, not least the legal profession.

THE SEX DISQUALIFICATION (REMOVAL) ACT 1919

Prior to the passing of the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act, women had made attempts to enter the legal profession, applying to the Law Society of Ireland and the



Figure 3: Chief Justice of Ireland, Frank Clarke, and Lord Chief Justice of Northern Ireland, Sir Declan Morgan, (both centre) looking at a volume of the Irish Memorial Record at the launch of the First World War commemoration in November 2018.

Honorable Society of King's Inns, but were repeatedly excluded, though no law formally forbade their inclusion. One such woman was Miss Weir Johnston who wrote to the King's Inns Benchers in 1901 to enquire if a woman could become a member of the Irish Bar. The Under-Treasurer was directed by the Benchers to inform her that "it was not competent for a lady to enter this Inn as a student or become a member of the Irish Bar. Ordered."

Then, on the 23rd December 1919, the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act became law, an act that was the culmination of centuries of activism and advocacy asserting the rights of women within public and private life. With the introduction of the Act barriers were removed and women began to make their presence felt in the legal profession leading in recent times in Ireland to almost the entire senior leadership of the justice and law enforcement structures in Ireland simultaneously being headed up by women, Chief Justice, Minister for Justice, Attorney General, Chief State Solicitor and Garda Commissioner.

The last 100 years has seen a number of positive changes for women within Irish society and the presence of women in the legal professions has contributed to the removal of the marriage bar, the availability of family planning services, a fairer taxation of married women's salaries, repealing of the 8th amendment and the availability of legal aid in civil and family matters, changes that can be said to have begun with the commencement of the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act in 1919.

ONLINE EXHIBITION

In anticipation of this pivotal event the Law Library wished to mark the occasion. Having gained significant experience in the previous two exhibitions we decided to collate an online exhibition, again using SWAY software, that would honour the first Irish women barristers. After some deliberation we decided to commemorate the event by compiling a list of the first 100 Irish women called to the Bar and to collate, where possible, a short biography on each of the women. Many of these women pushed through the barriers of society to blaze a trail for those that have followed over the last century and gave a voice to women all over Ireland. We therefore entitled the exhibition '*Trailblazers – 1919-2019–100 years of Women at the Irish Bar*'.

We were quickly able to compile a list of the first 100 women called to the Irish Bar beginning with Frances Kyle and Averil Deverell, who were called to the Bar on the 1st November 1921, and ending with the 100th woman, Honora Josephine Yvonne Scannell, who was called to the Bar on the 10th November 1973.

From the list of 100 women, we could easily locate biographical material for the more prominent women such as Averil Deverell, Mella Carroll, Mary Robinson, and Susan Denham. However, we soon discovered that

for a lot of the women there was little, if any, information available. We decided to launch an appeal to our members via Twitter, our inhouse e-zines and on our intranet, Barristers Desktop, in the hope that some of these women would be known to our members. The appeal proved very successful.

Members responded with stories of their pioneering mothers, aunts, and grandmothers, providing much needed information on these women – their educational and family backgrounds, their careers in the law and oftentimes the reason for their departure from the law. We were also very lucky that in most cases our members included a beautiful photograph alongside the biographies. These photographs brought life to the exhibition and personalised the women's stories by putting a face to the name. As we discovered with our previous exhibitions, both print and online, less is more when it comes to the text. People will only read a certain amount and for an exhibition to keep the interest of its reader, images are vital. So far, we have been able to locate photographs of 34 of the women. These photographs came from a variety of sources such as newspaper articles, online sources, and family and friends. Another unexpected resource for information was the genealogy website Ancestry.com, where publicly available family trees gave important information on some of our women, in particular when they got married, as marriage often signalled the end of a professional career for the women we were researching.

COLLABORATIVE VENTURE WITH THE KINGS INNS AND THE LAW SOCIETY

Whilst we were compiling the online exhibition, we were afforded a fantastic opportunity to collaborate with the Honorable Society of Kings Inns and the Law Society of Ireland on a physical exhibition honouring the remarkable women entering the legal profession over the past century. The physical exhibition was entitled '*Celebrating a Century of Equal Opportunities*' and it was decided that the exhibition would include nine panel boards. Each of the three organisations would have responsibility for two of the boards telling the story of the impact of the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919 on their institution and highlight pivotal female members in their organisation. The exhibition would also include an introductory and conclusionary board. In addition, the Veterinary Council of Ireland also contributed to the exhibition, highlighting the impact the 1919 act had on their profession.

The final board of the exhibition included statistics highlighting the change in the legal profession over the years. Of particular note is the change from 1969 to 2019. In 1969 just 5% of practising barristers and 5.8% of practising solicitors were women, however by 2019 38% of practising barristers and 51% of practising solicitors were women.



Figure 4: Cover image of the Trailblazers online exhibition.

RESULTS OF THE EXHIBITION

On the 30th November 2019, 200 guests were invited to a celebratory dinner in the King's Inns to mark the centenary anniversary of the enactment of the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919. The keynote speaker was former President of Ireland Dr Mary McAleese, and the collaborative exhibition was launched that night. The exhibition remained on view in the Kings Inns for a period of time with the intention of moving to the Bar of Ireland and then on to the Law Society of Ireland, but due to the current Covid-19 situation this has not yet occurred.

The Trailblazers online exhibition was also made available at this time through the Bar of Ireland website. When we began compiling it, we knew very little about these 100 women, however, over time we have composed a fairly good picture of the individual women, who they were, the obstacles they faced, their amazing achievements and how they helped pave the way for the advancement of women in the law. Despite our research and numerous appeals, there remain a number of women for whom we still have no information, but the advantage of an online exhibition is that it can be continually tweaked, and new information added as it arises. We regard the exhibition as a work in progress and as people contact us with additional information and photographs,

the exhibition expands. Each of the women have an important story to tell and our hope is that in time we will have compiled a biography of each of the 100 women, so that their story and their achievements have not been forgotten. We owe a debt of gratitude to these trailblazing women and it is a privilege to tell their stories and show how, through courage and perseverance, they have helped pave the way for future generations of women. Up to January 2021 over 7,000 people have viewed our online Trailblazers exhibition.

WHAT WE LEARNED

As with any large projects these exhibitions had to be a team effort. When we began working on our first exhibition in 2016, we asked for volunteers within the library who had an interest in working on such projects and received a great response. We now have a dedicated team of library staff who have worked tirelessly on each of the exhibitions, wanting the stories of our members and their families to be told and the history of the Bar of Ireland to be preserved. These projects have allowed them to use skills and knowledge that were previously underutilised and has given them the opportunity to collaborate with steering groups and outside stakeholders in a new way. In this way we have learned that there are often hidden talents within library staff, and it was a great experience to be able to bring these talents to the fore. Without the work and perseverance of these staff members, these stories would remain untold.

Also, our first exhibition on the 1916 Rising was a steep learning curve. None of us had ever been involved in putting together an exhibition, we knew nothing about panel boards, word counts, exhibition suppliers and so forth and we learned as we worked. One of the first big lessons was that you cannot include all the information you would like to, people will only read so much in an exhibition, so the ability to edit ruthlessly is very important. Images are also essential to hold the interest of the reader and really bring life to an exhibition and engage the reader. We also involved our members in each exhibition, by asking for their contributions, their stories and we feel that this not only made our jobs easier but also forged new connections.

BENEFITS TO THE LIBRARY

A huge amount of time and work goes into the creation of each exhibition, but we have found that the benefits to the library are such that they are very much a worthwhile exercise. The compiling and promoting of our historical exhibitions have proved invaluable to the library since we first turned our hand to it in 2016. It has allowed us to promote the history of the Bar of Ireland Law Library within the context of wider events in Irish society, to show our members the role of barristers in the shaping of Irish history over the past 200 years, which has given

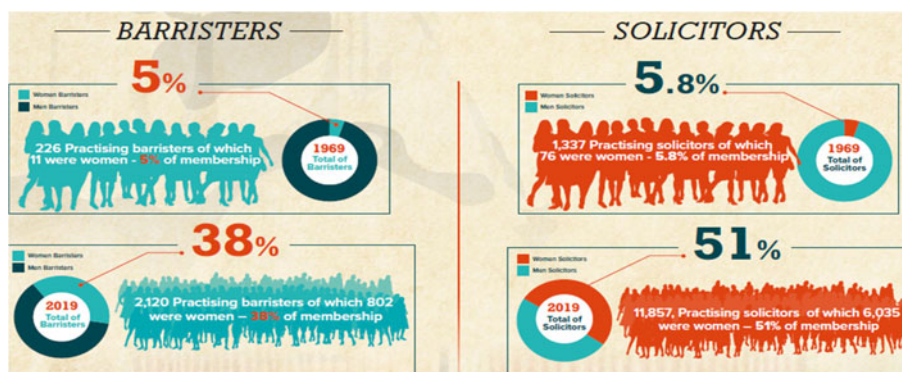


Figure 5: Infographic detailing showing changes in numbers of women practising over the past 50 years.

the organisation new tools for promoting the Bar of Ireland both to its members and the wider public.

Another benefit to the library is the connections that it has helped us make with our membership. Working in a professional library it can be hard to engage with users on a more personal level. By listening to their and their family's stories and providing a platform for these stories to be told, we have created a connection between them and the library that gives them a greater sense of ownership of the organisation that they are a part of and creates loyalty and trust between the library and the barristers.

Carrying out historical exhibitions is also a fantastic way of increasing collaborative opportunities with other organisations outside of our own. Through our historical exhibitions, and in particular our celebration of the centenary of women in the law, we have been able to work with the Courts Service of Ireland, the Honorable

Society of Kings Inns, the Law Society of Ireland, and other stakeholders. This has been a worthwhile experience in developing relationships with other law libraries and the wider legal profession in general, as well as changing perceptions of the Bar.

Our exhibition, *Bullets, Books and Barricades – the story and legacy of the Four Courts, 1916*, remains on show in our Distillery Building in Dublin and the World War I memorial exhibition is on show to the public in the Four Courts building. Regularly we witness people looking at and reading the exhibition, whether it be for five minutes to pass the time or for an hour. Even though our work on these physical exhibitions is over, we are still reaping the benefits and the stories in the exhibition are being told to new readers every day. This is especially true for the online presentations, where the material can be reanimated as related events and anniversaries arise.



Figure 6: The Bar of Ireland and The Law Society panel boards – Celebrating a Century of Equal Opportunities exhibition – 30th November 2019, Kings Inns.



Figure 7: Judges of the Irish Supreme Court at the start of the 21st century including Judge Catherine McGuinness, Judge Susan Denham, and Judge Fidelma Macken.

CONCLUSION

The curating of these exhibitions has been an enjoyable and worthwhile experience for all in the Law Library who have worked on them. Bringing benefits to the library in the form of collaboration and increased engagement with our membership it has also helped to connect library staff with the history of the organisation we work for and by extension impact positively on wellbeing, loyalty, and pride.

As technology becomes a more familiar tool (in no small part speeded up by the Covid-19 pandemic) we look forward to telling the story of the Bar through traditional as well as emerging and innovative ways. The pursuit of identity, community and a common history

will, we are confident, continue to offer captivating stories for the future.

Links:

Our online exhibitions can be viewed at the following links:

Trailblazers 1919-2019 100 Years of Women at the Irish Bar: <https://www.lawlibrary.ie/news/campaigns/trailblazers-100-years-of-women-at-the-bar.aspx>

They Shall Not Grow Old: Irish Barristers and the First World War: <https://www.lawlibrary.ie/news/campaigns/world-war-i-centenary.aspx>

Biographies

Vanessa Curley is Assistant Librarian at the Bar of Ireland Law Library. Vanessa began working for the Bar of Ireland, Law Library in 1999. Her current role involves job-sharing two positions which are Assistant Librarian Collections & Content Development and Assistant Librarian Systems & Discovery Services. Vanessa has been secretary of the BIALL Irish Group for over 6 years.

Sarah Foley is Assistant Librarian at the Bar of Ireland Law Library. Sarah has been working in the Law Library in Dublin for over 15 years. She is responsible for the acquisitions and management of the large print collection across all four locations as well as the development of the digital archive. She has been convenor of the BIALL Irish Group for the past 4 years.